

## **Vicksburg's Influence on Ulysses S. Grant**

Allan Luo

University Laboratory High School, Urbana

Teacher: Rosemary Laughlin

Ulysses S. Grant was a tactical general whose victory at Vicksburg showed that he could adjust his plans to achieve his goals. Vicksburg was a decisive battle that would determine whether the Union would win the Mississippi River and the West. Grant utilized his resources and troops to the fullest extent. Even though he had many men, his genius allowed him to make use of them and defeat the Confederacy with his brilliant makeshift plan. His experience at Vicksburg influenced and aided him in later battles.

Ulysses Hiram Grand was born on April 27, 1822 at Point Pleasant Ohio. His father, Jesse Root Grant, was a tanner. Ulysses worked with horses on his father's farm because he disliked the family tannery work. Jesse sent Ulysses to the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York in 1839 for further education. There he changed his name to Ulysses S. Grant, probably to avoid the abbreviation of "HUG" sewn on his uniform. He graduated from West Point in 1843, having excelled in horsemanship and mathematics. He was interested in art and read classic novels during his free time. He became a brevet second lieutenant in the Fourth United States Infantry at St. Louis, where he married Julia Boggs Dent, the sister of his roommate at West Point. Grand fought in the Mexican War and gained experience in handling troops. He resigned from the army in 1854.

When the Civil War started in 1861, Grant began training troops and gradually advanced in rank. Grant made his headquarters in Cairo, Illinois, and he went to Springfield to work for the Illinois Adjutant General. Two months later, Governor Richard Yates appointed him colonel of a regiment that became the Twenty-first Illinois Volunteers. Grant led these troops on a campaign against Confederates in Missouri. He soon became a general and was commanding troops in battle.

Grant proposed to capture Vicksburg, the key city that guarded the Mississippi River between Memphis and New Orleans, in the winter of 1862-1863. Vicksburg was the remaining Confederate fort on the river. If Vicksburg could be captured, it would give the Union a great advantage by being able to control access to the entire western front. Grant had already recognized the city's importance, and had tried to take it a few times before in vain. He had attacked from the north on the west side of the Mississippi River but the low and marshy ground bogged his army down. His attacks were easily stopped.

Grant knew that he needed a different approach. In April, he launched a new plan. He sent Rear Admiral David D. Porter's fleet of gunboats and supply ships to slip past the heavy Confederate artillery along the river and establish a base south of Vicksburg. Only two Confederate forces hindered Grant's way to Vicksburg itself. His troops outnumbered the surprised Confederates in their camps south of Vicksburg and the enemy forces scattered into the fields. Grant ordered Major General William T. Sherman to destroy the city of Jackson's industry and rail facilities. As Sherman and

Major General James B. McPherson advanced toward Jackson, Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston wired Richmond, "I am too late." General Johnston ordered the city evacuated.

Grant went on to defeat Lt. General John C. Pemberton and his army, which was the largest force that he had so far to oppose Grant, on the route between Jackson and Vicksburg. Pemberton retreated with his men into Vicksburg. The Union forces pursued the Confederates over the Big Black River after a light skirmish at Big Black River Bridge on May 17, 1863. Grant's troops drove toward Vicksburg with only light resistance to hinder their way.

On May 18, Grant's first attempt to seize Vicksburg failed. On May 22, the second assault was another failure.

Grant ordered a siege in mid-May because direct attacks were not working. Pemberton's 20,000 man-garrisons were slowly reduced by starvation and illness. Grant's forces and Porter's gunboats repeatedly bombarded the area. Gradually, the besieged city wore down, and surrendered after 47 days on July 4, 1863. This was the day after another crucial Union victory at Gettysburg.

Now, the Union controlled the Mississippi and the Confederacy was effectively separated on to two sides of the river. This was the turning point of the Civil War and from then on, the Confederacy was gradually forced back toward their capital city of Richmond. They would be defeated in most of the ensuing battles.

Vicksburg had a heavy influence on Grant and the way he handled his future battles. He realized that when a plan did not work, he should not try it again and again, but he should devise a new plan. He applied this in one of the next big battles, the Battle of Cold Harbor. Grant had moved toward Richmond, the Confederate capital, and Lee tried to stop him. On June 1, 1864, Grant reached Cold Harbor, a community slightly north of Richmond. He attacked Lee on June 3 with 50,000 men. Lee had his 30,000 dig trenches and defend themselves well. Many of Grant's men were cut down in the first few minutes of the charge and the Union suffered heavy losses.

"Butcher Grant", as critics called him after the battle, again had to change his strategy. He knew that if he repeated his moves, Lee could fall back to the defenses at Richmond, where the Confederates would be able to withstand a siege. Therefore, he decided to attempt to force a quick "win-or-lose" battle. In April 1865, he seized the railroads that supplied Richmond. Lee tried to retreat, but Grant barred his way with 113,000 troops. Knowing that further fighting would just be wasting lives, Lee surrendered on April 6, 1865, in a house owned by Southern farmer, Wilmer McLean, in the little settlement of Appomattox Court House, Virginia.

Grant's flexible strategy planning gave him a valuable "back road" that he could use when things were not going well. He learned quickly and effectively from his mistakes. The Confederates must have been surprised when Grant adjusted his plans, and their surprise led to the shackles of slavery being completely removed – a much deserved

surprise for the five million southern slaves. [From Patricia L. Faust, *The Battle of Vicksburg*, [www.civilwarhome.com/battleofvicksburg.htm](http://www.civilwarhome.com/battleofvicksburg.htm). (Nov. 21, 2004); and State of Mississippi, Department of Archives and History, *A Guide to the Campaign & Siege of Vicksburg*.]